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ABSTRACT

The process-oriented advanced technical writing course described in this paper leads students progressively through the writing and editing processes while involving them in the technical writing of their respective disciplines. The readings, exercises, and report assignments used in the course are discussed to show how these activities awaken students to a sense of themselves as writers and to an awareness of the writing processes and the written products of professionals in their disciplines. Also discussed are the editing workshops that provide practice in evaluating and revising papers that students have prepared for courses in their respective disciplines. (RL)

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Advanced Undergraduate Technical Writing: English 318 at New Mexico State University

English 318, the advanced undergraduate technical writing course at New Mexico State University, has evolved from hard experience. That hard experience was a sophomore-level course that focused on involving students in the technical writing in their own disciplines. But we discovered that many sophomore students--and too often our students were second-semester freshmen--were not adequately oriented in their own disciplines. Consequently, we have lifted this emphasis out of our sophomore-level course and implemented it successfully in our advanced technical writing course.[1]

We now offer a process-oriented advanced technical writing course that leads students progressively through the writing and editing processes while involving them in the technical writing of their respective disciplines.

But first a word about our sophomore-level course. Although it is not a prerequisite for English 318, it now provides our students who are looking for a year-long course in technical writing with a good background in correspondence, report writing, and oral presentation that may or may not focus on their majors. Further, it introduces students to the idea of writing as a process and "breaks them in" to successful workshop participation and to group work on class projects. Our students who have taken the sophomore-level course frequently go on to its sequel, English 318.

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English 318, Advanced Technical and Professional Communication, then reinforces the concept of writing as a process through a series of readings, exercises, and report assignments that awaken students to a sense of themselves as writers and require them to investigate the writing processes and the written products of professionals in their disciplines. And English 318 engages students in a series of editing workshops that provide practice in evaluating and revising papers they have written for courses in their respective disciplines.

Writing as Process

To reinforce the concept of writing as process, we spend three class periods early in the semester reading and discussing articles on writing processes and in writing exercises that illustrate various writing processes. For the first of these sessions, we ask students to read Michael E. Adelstein's "Writing is Work,"[2] in which Adelstein breaks the writing process into five stages and allocates approximate times for their completion: worrying, 15%; planning, 10%; writing, 25%; revising, 45%; proofreading, 5%. In class we give students a short writing problem and guide them through these five stages, timing them accordingly.

For the next class we ask students to read W. Morris Dean's "Invoking the Muse of Technical Writing."[3] Dean describes the writing rpocess as consisting of three stages: 1) preparation, in which the writer gathers materials and assigns the problem to the unconscious mind; 2) incubation, in which the muse is left to do its work unhindered by conscious thought processes; and 3) inspiration, in which the muse communicates and the writer writes. In class, we give our students another writing assignment

and this time encourage them to follow Dean's process. To help them, we give them a topic and tell them to direct their muses to go to work. While their muses are working, we drink tea and listen to Mozart or Chopin. Then we ask our students to let their muses communicate with them --and they write.

For the third session we ask our students to read Linda Flower and John Hayes's "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem,"[4] in which Flower and Hayes discuss the importance of the writer's goals in formulating a rhetorical problem. Their model of the rhetorical problem has two major parts: the rhetorical situation, which involves the exigency or assignment and the audience; and second, the writer's own goals, which involve the reader, the persona or self, the meaning, and the text. In class, we give our students a short writing exercise and tell them to use their own writing process. After about 10 or 15 minutes, we ask them to stop--some have not started writing yet. Then we ask them to write a retrospective protocol of their writing process, to put down in writing as best they can all that they thought or did during the previous 10 or 15 minutes. After students have done this, we ask several of them to share their analyses with the class, and we discuss the writing process in terms of persona, audience, meaning, and form.

By now our students are intrigued by their own writing processes. They realize that Adelstein's process doesn't quite fit them and neither does Dean's. But they are intrigued by writing. More importantly, as some of them have revealed in their logs--which I ask them to keep throughout the semester--they no longer feel guilty because they can't immediately set pen to paper. They no longer feel guilty because they can write

only under pressure. They no longer feel guilty because their approaches to writing are different from the way some English teacher has told them they should be. In short, these exercises have helped our students to acquire confidence in themselves as writers. Moreover, they are curious about writing; and some of them inevitably choose to research and write about the writing process of a fellow student or of a professional in their field.

At this point we assign an analytical report that deals with writing process and/or structure and style. Students have their choice of three assignments:

1. Adelstein recommends a writing process appropriate for technical writing; Dean recommends another process. Flower and Hayes briefly discuss protocol analysis, a procedure for studying a writer's writing process. By conducting a protocol analysis yourself, research the writing process of a professional in your field whom you respect, and report on your insights into his or her writing process.
2. Conduct a protocol analysis of the present writing process of a fellow student in the class. Report on your insights into his or her writing process, including any apparent influences on it by the work we have done on writing processes, structure, and style.
3. Accepting Kelley's visual rhetoric as a guide to quality in structure in technical writing, and accepting Stratton's analysis of style as a guide to quality in style, study structure

and style in a sample of writing by a professional in your field. Report on the quality of the structure and the style in the sample.[5]

In addition to our work on writing process, we spend two classes each on structure and style, stressing particularly Kelley's concept of visual rhetoric and Stratton's method for analyzing technical style. Our class discussions also include report format, scientific method, mechanics, and graphics.

We urge students to work on these assignments in collaboration with one or two other students. We explain to them that they need experience working with others to prepare them to work as professional writers and that they can obviously learn from one another.

Before these reports are due we bring students together in class workshops to edit them. We use one workshop for the text of the report and one workshop for the pages before and after the text.

Editing Workshops

We feel that an important factor in the success of our technical writing courses is our use of workshops, which inherently focus on process as opposed to product. We begin preparing our students for workshops on the first day of class. We know we must begin early to break down ordinary classroom barriers and inhibitions and to prepare our students for group work.[6] Our first class meeting is devoted to group introductions. We ask students to work in groups of three to draw up introductions of one another

for presentation to the class. Students then introduce one another to the class, offering information about background and interests, in addition to the obvious names and majors where most introductions tend to stop. By the time this first class is over, our students have visited with at least two other members of the class. And they have presented a short talk to the class, a talk about someone else, not about themselves. That the talk is about someone else is significant in that it helps students forget about themselves and communicate with other members of the class.

A resume preparation unit early in the semester also helps our students get acquainted with one another. We first lecture on job search techniques --and we find our students are avid about this subject. Then we spend two classes in workshops: one on the resume and one on the letter of application. In these workshops we have students work in groups of three, and by using different groups for resume and for cover letter, we insure that each student becomes well acquainted with at least four more members of the class.

By the time the resume preparation unit is over our students are talking freely with one another. This helps to get them together for group work on their analytical reports, and by the time they come together for the workshops on these reports, much of their early self-consciousness and many of their inhibitions have disappeared. They are now ready for a series of intensive editing workshops.

As we begin the next unit, an editing workshop unit, we ask students to read Mary S. Hageman, Louise M. Vest, and Patrick M. Kelley's "Editorial Dialogue."[7] One class is then spent discussing editorial techniques and preparing students for the editing workshops which follow.

For this unit, we send students to their majors for raw material. We ask them to bring reports or other projects they are completing for courses in their disciplines to class for editing. Each student brings in a project in draft form. We reproduce the piece of writing and give each student a copy. During the next class meeting, the entire class joins in editing and discussing the report. Students are then responsible for revising these projects and turning in a final draft for a grade.

This unit works especially well with heterogeneous groupings of students. Our nursing students, for example, become intensely aware of the importance of good topic sentences and transitions in leading the uninitiated reader through the intricacies and technicalities of a report in computer science. Learning thus the importance of logical structure and development, they are even more sensitive to it in their own writing. A remarkable feature of this unit is the improved quality of the drafts we edit as the unit progresses. Students who submit their drafts for editing later in the unit are clearly using the skills they acquire from analyzing other students' papers.

Not only does this unit give students the opportunity to look closely at the work of others, it reinforces the importance of revision as a part of the writing process, and it helps students develop editing techniques they can apply on the job or in revising their own work. Students overcome self-consciousness about their own writing; they learn that writing does not have to be a solitary activity. that it is a process that can and often should be shared with others.

The final report requirement, an informational, memorandum report on the forms of technical writing in students' major fields, also reinforces workshop skills and encourages group collaboration. We ask students early in the semester to collect a representative sample of the technical writing in their major fields. Urging them to work in groups of four or five, if possible, we ask them to analyze the forms of technical writing in their fields in terms of audience, writer, and purpose, and to prepare an informational report on their findings. We use two workshops as the semester ends for this report. One of the strengths of this assignment is that it encourages students to talk with their major professors and other professionals in their fields. By the time our students complete the workshops for this final report assignment at the end of the semester, they have learned an immense amount of information about the role of writing in their disciplines. Moreover, they have come to see writing as a process and themselves as writers involved in that process.

Notes

[1] The New Mexico State University technical writing programs, as they presently exist, were developed by Professor Patrick M. Kelley. The introductory course in technical writing, English 218--then titled "Report Writing"--was first taught in the fall of 1970 by Professor Kelley, who developed the course into its present format. From one section of about 20 students in the fall of 1970, the course has grown to 10 sections enrolling more than 200 students per semester. Professor Kelley developed and taught the first course in English 318 to a small group of students in the spring of 1976. He taught the course again in the spring of 1979, this time to 15 students. Since then the demand for the course has grown. In spring 1982 we offered two sections of the course to a total of 32 students; we are planning three sections for the fall of 1982.

[2] Michael E. Adelstein, Contemporary Business Writing (New York: Random House, 1971).

[3] W. Morris Dean, "Invoking the Muse of Technical Writing," Technical Communication 20(4):9-11.

[4] Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," College Composition and Communication 31:21-32.

[5] See Patrick M. Kelley, "Visual Rhetoric in Teaching Technical Writing," in Proceedings of the 27th International Technical Communication Conference 2:R 209-213, Society for Technical Communication; A. K. Clark, "Readability in Technical Writing--Principles and Procedures," IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication 18:67-70; and Charles R. Stratton, "Analyzing Technical Style," Technical Communication 26(3):4-9.

[6] Linda S. Chavarria, "Using Workshop Sessions in Teaching Technical Writing" (Scheduled for publication in the Technical Writing Teacher, Winter 1982).

[7] Mary S. Hageman, Louise M. Vest, and Patrick M. Kelley, "Editorial Dialogue: an Alternative Writer-Editor Relationship," in Proceedings of the 28th International Technical Communication Conference W38-40, Society for Technical Communication.